

# The Life and Times of Blessed Frederic Ozanam

NO 09

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*This unit looks at the Church at the time of the French Revolution.*

## *“Les Miserables” by Victor Hugo*

*“People reduced to the extremity of need are also driven to the utmost limits of their resources, and woe to any defenceless person who comes in their way. Work and wages, food and warmth, courage and goodwill – all is lost to them. The daylight dwindles into shadow and darkness enters their hearts; and within this darkness, man seizes upon the weakness of woman and child and forces them into ignominy.*

*No one is then excluded. Desperation is bounded only by the flimsiest of walls, all giving access to vice and crime... they appear utterly depraved, corrupt, vile and odious; but it is rare for those who have sunk so low not to be degraded in the process and there comes a point, moreover, where the unfortunate and infamous are grouped together, merged in a single fateful world. They are **Les Miserables** – the outcast, the underdogs.”*

This was Victor Hugo's view on poverty in France, written in 1957, four years after the death of Frederic Ozanam. More than anything else, it demonstrated that little progress had been made in eradicating poverty since the French Revolution proclaimed the values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in 1769.



### **Parish Communities**

A feature before the French Revolution was the vitality of parish communities, with the strength of the Church passing from the towns to the country. Peasant country life was dominated by twin loyalties – the family and the parish, with the parish being the centre of all major celebrations of family

life, and a social centre as well. The reason for this shift goes back to the reform of the clergy during the Council of Trent in 1545. Trent judged that popular religiosity had deteriorated into many superstitious practices. It called for devotions such as pilgrimages and cults to local saints to be more centralized, under the control of the clergy. As a result, devotion to the Sacred Heart became the most widely practiced form of spirituality. Other devotions centred around the life of Christ and the person of Mary, especially the Rosary.

### **FEMINIZATION OF RELIGION**

From this, women emerged as the great supporters of the reforms from the Council of Trent, with the result that during the 1700's in France, there was a massive feminization of religion. These country women were the largest protest group opposed to the excesses of the French Revolution and saw themselves as restorers of the faith.

On the other hand, the French monarchy looked to the Church for support and the image of wealthy bishops living off the fat of the land was as prevalent as that of the nobility. The church reflected the inequalities of that wealth – there were poor and rich clergy. The poor clergy were known as cures. They were numerous and well at the time.

One such cure was Jean-Baptiste Marie Vianney, (1786-1859) who became famous for his humility and wisdom. Known as the Cure of Ars, he went on to become the patron saint of parish priests.

### **Briefly, the causes of the French Revolution were:**

1. France was on the verge of bankruptcy because of wars in Europe and her intervention in the American revolution. Huge tax burdens were imposed on the people.
2. Growing industrialization led to dislocation, poverty and finally desperation.

3. The 1770's and 1780's were characterized by poor harvests and this led to food protests, especially among the market women of Paris.
4. As well, new ideas of governance were fermenting. The Bible of the French Revolution was Rousseau's "Social Contract" which went through numerous printings at the time.

### The Church repressed

At first, the new Government of the French Revolution in 1789 attacked Church corruption and the wealth of the Bishops and Abbots throughout France. – causes with which many Christians could identify. Soon, however, repression followed, and the two years of 1793 – 94 became known as the Reign of Terror. The guillotine became the symbol of that period. Christianity was banned and 30,000 clergy were forced into exile. Hundreds were killed. This led to the setting up of the **Society for the Propagation of the Faith** in 1822, by Pauline Jaricot, in Lyons. A fellow parishioner was the young Frederic Ozanam, who helped organized funds to be sent to missions in China, Africa, and the United States. Even when he went to Paris, Frederic remained involved with this endeavour, editing the Society's Annals for ten years. He also acted as a liaison between its Parish and Lyon Councils.

The Church survived, with opposition led by rural women on the period. Their protest expressed itself in the following ways: They boycotted Masses by priests who took the Oath of Allegiance to the new government. They baptized babies in the absence of priests. And they taught the Catechism when almost every Church was closed. It was a revival of the Church of the Catacombs.

Their biggest success was the 1801 Concordat signed between the Church and Napoleon Bonaparte which restored Catholicism as a religion to France. One could say, however, that Napoleon had begun to see by that time the advantages of the Religious Congregations and Charities in helping the poor.

#### QUESTION - A NEW CENTURY, A NEW HOPE!

Make notes by undertaking a "SWOT" analysis of your Conference or particular involvement in St Vincent de Paul. What are the successes, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) to your work and interaction with people in poverty? In 200 words, write down a Statement of Vincentian Hope for this new century.

### Triumph and division

Meanwhile, Napoleon's armies seemed triumphant. Wherever they went, Napoleon abolished monastic orders, ended religious education and took over Church lands. Relations between Pope Pius VII and Napoleon deteriorated so badly that the Pope was imprisoned. Instead of weakening the Pope's position, chastened local Churches began to look to Rome for a lead. Whereas Popes of the previous century had seemed pampered princelings, the sufferings of Pius VII restored the aura of holiness to the Vatican, giving the Papacy a renewed moral authority.



#### A RENAISSANCE OF FAITH FOLLOWED...

*It was reflected in church influence, sacramental participation and renewed missionary activity. France was to the fore, perhaps because its revolution had destroyed so much Church corruption there. This set the scene for the spectacular development of religious Congregations and Church movements in France. The period of maximum growth was between 1820 - 1860. It was the same time that Frederic and Society in 1833. Many of the Congregations, such as the Daughters of Charity, shepherd the new movements, eg, Rosalie Rendu mentors Frederic and the early growth of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.*

### Alliance of throne and altar

However, division was strong in the Church. The Popes had been left with such a fear of revolution that they remained aligned with the established rulers of Europe for early a century. Worse still, Pius VII and his successors were convinced that they must retain control of the Papal States or be at the mercy of violent intruders. It was not until Leo XIII became Pope in 1878 that the Church was prepared to engage the modern world and adopt the ideas of thinkers like Frederic Ozanam and French priest de Lamennais.

